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ABSTRACT

This paper describes "Building Local Leadership for Middle-Grades Schools Improvement," a school-improvement effort implemented in six schools (three urban and three nonurban) within two neighboring districts in the south central United States. Methodology involved a survey of faculty members' perceptions conducted in 1988 and 1989, interviews with key participants, observation, and document analysis. This paper examines the dilemmas that exist between planning for restructuring and dealing with the daily realities of implementing such plans. Six factors critical to successful school reform are identified: (1) the stability and safety of the school environment; (2) central-office support for reform initiatives; (3) onsite teacher leadership; (4) faculty cohesiveness; (5) faculty commitment to the change process; and (6) the ongoing involvement of a facilitating principal who encourages collegiality. Findings demonstrate that change is a slow, painful, and unsettling process. However, the reform efforts also emphasized the value of sharing ideas, the importance of self-directed planning, the need for new skills and staff training, and the need to provide young adolescents with developmentally appropriate programs. Two figures and one table are included. (Contains 75 references.) (LMI)

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Obstacles to Restructuring: Experiences of Six Middle-Grades Schools

Ellen M. Pechman
Jean A. King

with the assistance of

Gina Schack
Nadiene VanDyke

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Obstacles to Restructuring:

Experiences of Six Middle-Grades Schools

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Ellen M. Pechman
Policy Studies Associates, Inc.
Washington, D.C.

Jean A. King
University of Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota

with the assistance of

Gina Schack
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

Nadiene VanDyke
Tulane University
New Orleans, Louisiana

August 1993

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National Center for Restructuring
Education, Schools, and Teaching
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, New York 10027

Summary

During the late 1980s, strange bedfellows hovered together under the canopy of restructuring: policy makers and reformers, school researchers, and administrative and teaching practitioners. Optimistic visions of collaboration and innovation anticipated a "wave of reform" that, this time, would *really* change schools, especially for middle-grades students. This paper tracks one of these initiatives. It describes one project, "Building Local Leadership for Middle-Grades School Improvement," a school-improvement effort in six schools within neighboring but different districts.

The program was built on a concept of systemic change: the idea that middle-grades schools, reorganized developmentally, could offer ten- to fifteen-year-olds more inviting and effective learning opportunities. School and district teams in six schools united behind collaboratively developed missions and carefully constructed plans for program restructuring. With community and school board backing, along with full commitment from teachers, school site administrators, and central office staff, reform was expected to unfold logically. Despite the logic and the systematic planning, an array of converging factors stymied success. In this case study, the authors detail the workings of the change process in six diverse schools and define the dilemmas that exist between creating effective action plans for school-based reform and dealing with the day-to-day realities of implementing such plans. The study explores the processes and problems that contributed to an unexpectedly uneven implementation and, in the end, to disappointing results.

What lessons were learned in developing effective structures for change and sustained school improvement? The authors identify six factors as critical to successful school reform:

1. The stability and safety of the school environment;

2. Central-office support for reform initiatives;

3. On-site teacher leadership;

4. Faculty cohesiveness;

5. Faculty commitment to the change process; and

6. The ongoing involvement of a facilitating principal who encourages collaboration and collegiality among faculty and staff.

This study examines the effects of the presence or absence of these various factors within project schools.

What obstacles and opportunities affected the course of the improvement effort envisioned for these schools?

The study showed that even with the most careful structures and well-intentioned plans for change, old habits and ingrained attitudes about schools and teaching, entrenched bureaucracies, and outmoded leadership styles die hard. The project proved that change is a slow, painful, and unsettling process, and that "it gets worse before it gets better." Yet the reform efforts undertaken in these six schools also created new and varied opportunities to think about and influence the change process. Specifically, the project emphasized the value of sharing ideas with colleagues both within and across schools, the importance of self-directed planning for initiating and shaping school improvement, the need for new skills and staff training, and the necessity for providing young adolescents with developmentally appropriate programs.

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to many colleagues who contributed to this work. Polly Bower, Vanessa McKendall, and Rosalyn Smith served as liaisons to the schools and kept our work grounded. We learned immeasurably from the participating teachers and principals as we all struggled to cultivate a spirit of collaboration and an understanding of school reform that would serve youth in the middle grades. The project was generously funded by the BellSouth and Ford Foundations at the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and by the BellSouth Foundation at Tulane University. Additional information about the project can be obtained from Ellen Pechman, Policy Studies Associates, Inc., 1718 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20009.

The late 1980s was a productive time in middle-grades school reform. After years of neglect, and following numerous reports championing the needs of young adolescents (e.g., Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Children's Defense Fund, 1988; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1985), ten- to fifteen-year-olds gained the attention of policy makers. Philanthropic organizations and government agencies spawned numerous initiatives to strengthen support for young teenagers, with particular emphasis on improving their schools (August, Salamans, and Pittman, 1989; Children's Defense Fund, 1988). As the "second wave" of school reform was gaining momentum, mandates for action washed over middle-grades schools (e.g., Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986; California State Department of Education, 1987; and others), leaving teachers and school administrators navigating the rushing waters in leaky boats (Donaldson, 1985; Dorman, 1987; McEwin and Alexander, 1987).

John Goodlad points to the inherent weakness of externally initiated efforts such as these. He recalls how clearly the research on change demonstrates that renewal resides in the power of *school-based* groups to engage in an elusively simple process: dialogue -- dialogue that is data-based, decision-oriented, and continuing (Goodlad, 1991). Fullan's extensive studies of school change conclude with a similar insight. Change, he writes, "is an exercise in pursuing meaning" (1991, p. 351). In turn, meaning translates most successfully into action through collaboration among groups of people that create the ideas and the wherewithal to carry them out. McLaughlin (1990) adds that change strategies established with professional networks and associations of teachers may be more effective at promoting sustained improvement in schools than strategies that rely on institutions and public policies (see also Berman and McLaughlin, 1978; Crandall and Loucks, 1983; Lieberman, 1986).

This paper describes a project called "Building Local Leadership for Middle-Grades School Improvement," a school-improvement effort in six schools within two neighboring, but very different, districts. Building on emerging theories of change, the program's guiding assumption was that there would be improvement only after change occurred within and among the people who would remain after the project concluded -- the teachers, administrators, parents, and community. This is a story of ripples, not waves; no checklists or prescriptions emerged. Nevertheless, the project's outcomes reaffirmed the wisdom of Fullan and others (Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988; Louis and Miles, 1990; Schorr with Schorr, 1989) that solutions are in the collective and informed actions of front-line practitioners who relinquish "if only" in favor of "when I" (Fullan, 1991, p. 351). The message of the power and limitations of the personal element in reform is significant, but it is also so often overlooked in the search for tools and tricks that it bears reexamining through case histories such as this one.

Caring people in the participating schools had long struggled to achieve success with youngsters who faced sobering future prospects. For the most part, these efforts had been conventional, their achievements limited. This leadership project sought to strengthen the knowledge base of the staff and to build their capacity to lead innovation. The project succeeded in stimulating new levels of dialogue and planning among faculty and school administrators who, for the most part, were unaware of how antiquated and unsuccessful

their accepted ways of doing business had become. These were small but significant steps that, for a short time, endowed a cadre of the professionals in each school with a much-needed sense of professional efficacy and a new commitment to students.

Improving Schools for Young Adolescents

Young adolescents' rapid growth and development, coupled with their openness to new experiences, bring unprecedented opportunities for intervention to guide patterns of learning and development. Yet middle-school students pose a unique challenge to schools: Their needs are boundary-spanning and shift quickly, often dramatically, and unpredictably. New choices, greater awareness of community and world, and strong connections with peers compete mightily with a school's academic program for youngsters' interest and commitment (Lipsitz, 1984). For these reasons, responsive middle-grades schools require flexible organizational patterns that bridge traditional structures and create new relationships among young people, teachers, and communities (Alexander and George, 1981; Eccles and Midgley, 1989; Wheelock and Dorman, 1987). Schools are already required to demand academic excellence, nurture social and physical development, and encourage cognitive growth; now making connections -- among parents, schools, health organizations, and community services -- becomes a central responsibility of well-functioning schools for ten- to fifteen-year-olds (Lipsitz, 1986; Wiles and Bondi, 1986). Unfortunately, both academic and social responsiveness are uncommon. Middle-grades schools are better known for their rigidity and neglect than for their flexibility and compassion (Lounsbury and Clark, 1990; ***Phi Delta Kappan***, 1990).

During the past decade there has been ample documentation of society's general failure to accommodate adolescent uniqueness and development (Adelson, 1986; Elkind, 1984; Simmons and Blyth, 1987). This is true despite the fact that researchers and practitioners have sound evidence about "what works" to help young adolescents thrive in schools (Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, 1987; George and Oldaker, 1985; Johnston and Markle, 1986; Lipsitz, 1977; Rutter, Maugham, and Mortimer, 1979). Moreover, an established research base on school improvement and organizational development describes the characteristics of successful secondary schools (Corcoran and Wilson, 1986; Fruchter, 1986; Gottfredson, 1986; Lightfoot, 1983; Maeroff, 1988) and analyzes what it takes to manage change (Crandall and Loucks, 1983; Cuban, 1988; Fullan, 1982, 1991; Hall and Hord, 1987; Hord *et al.*, 1987; Louis and Miles, 1990; Saxl, Miles, and Lieberman, 1989).

This research suggested three elements that were incorporated into a plan for developing a consortium of local leaders for middle-grade school improvement: (1) vision- or mission-building, organized around the adolescent learner, with special concern to young

adolescents' shifting social, physical, and cognitive needs; (2) granting teachers meaningful authority to plan, decide on, and initiate changes they see need to be made; and (3) sustained administrative support and technical assistance, provided to both the school and central offices. The support gave the schools' teachers and principals the time, materials, expertise, and resources to focus on improving the program they offered young adolescents, and it buoyed the limited supply of assistance available from the central offices.

The Approach to Change

The approach to change applied in these six schools has been described by Waugh and Punch (1987) and by Paul (1977) as a problem-solving strategy that involves user diagnosis of problems, a search for solutions, and the selection of alternatives for trial implementation. It encouraged "adaptive implementation," anticipating that schools would modify and adjust the researcher-initiated program to their specific purposes (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978), but it provided a systematic structure for school-based planning to establish transformation-orientation (Joyce, McKibbin, and Hersh, 1983; Lieberman, 1986). Staff development was embedded in two comprehensive-needs analyses (Dorman, 1984; Pechman, 1989) the schools undertook. With teachers leading the assessment, the schools scrutinized key aspects of their educational programs, asking: What is unique about our students? What and how are we teaching them? Is there an environment of support for students' safe and healthy development?

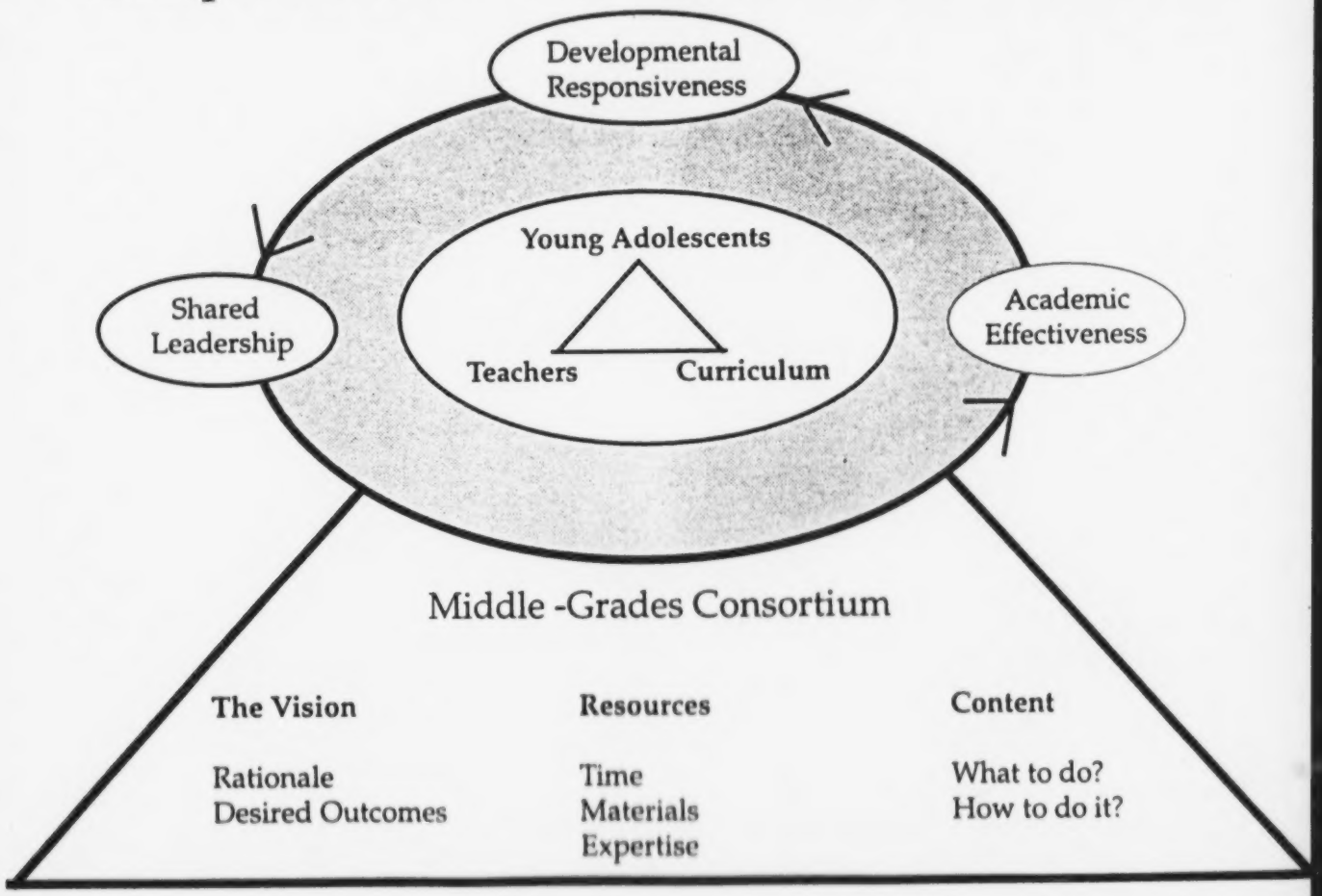
Figure 1 (on page 4) depicts the project's conceptual framework. It assumes a dynamic and continuing interaction at the core of the educational enterprise among students, teachers, and curriculum. Three elements -- responsiveness to young adolescents' developmental needs, shared leadership among the faculty, and an academically effective program -- are central to strong middle-grades education. The innovation of the project was to establish a working consortium consisting of site-based team leaders and their principals, outside facilitators from the university, community representatives, and district-level administrators to create a lattice of continuing support for the overall change process. United as the Middle-Grades Consortium (MGC), this leadership was to be a foundation for improvement in three ways: It helped clarify the project's rationale and its outcomes -- the *vision*; it facilitated the organization of time, materials, and expertise -- the *resources*; and it pointed to options for enriching the content of the *curriculum*.

Through regular staff development and joint planning, the school leaders -- principals and teachers alike -- defined the mission of the project in each school and conducted a comprehensive self-study to determine a practical agenda for accomplishing it. As Louis and Miles (1990) and Fullan (1991) emphasize, vision-building and planning interact and evolve. In this case, data collection, analysis, and planning were designed as strategies for keeping in

Figure 1

Building Local Leadership for Middle-Grades School Improvement

Conceptual Model for the Middle Grades Consortium



view the schools' missions, expanding their knowledge, and bolstering their commitment. The consortium also helped members across schools maneuver through the inevitable constraining obstacles within schools, and to creatively meet and overcome organizational or bureaucratic barriers they encountered.

Within schools, the change process was directed by teacher-led teams that received new substantive information -- resources and content -- about curriculum and innovation from one another and from "outside experts," the consulting practitioners and university researchers who facilitated the project. Consortium members also exchanged valued practical wisdom about how to adapt new ideas to existing school procedures, schedules, programs, and curricula. Outsiders made suggestions, but practitioners extracted most usable knowledge from the realities of day-to-day experience.

Description of the Participating Schools

In the fall of 1987, six middle-grades schools within two districts in the south central United States were invited by university-based researchers to become laboratories for planning and initiating client-centered schools for young adolescents.[1] Three schools were part of a large urban city system. The other three, located twenty miles west of the city, were down river in a part-rural, part-small town industrial community. Table 1 (on page 6) provides demographic information about each of the schools.

The urban schools confronted the characteristic problems of city education: underfunding, limited parental involvement, school facilities equipped with only the barest necessities, and a dominating concern about low test scores. In two of the schools, students came largely from dilapidated housing projects nearby; the third, a magnet school, served a culturally diverse community, although almost 90 percent of its students were eligible to receive free lunches.

The populations of the three nonurban schools were more balanced demographically. A larger proportion of students in each was from middle-class families; standardized test scores were within the national average, although lower than the staff wanted them to be; school faculties were more adequately supported with staff-development services; and the schools were housed in newer buildings with better-maintained facilities.

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[1] The project team included staff of the Education Department at Tulane University and the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Tulane group served as program facilitators and lead researchers, and the Center for Early Adolescence provided the assessment tools and consultation to schools on enhancing services to young adolescents.

Table 1

Middle-Grades School Change Project
School Demographic Statistics

Urban Schools

	Total Enrollment	Ethnic Makeup	% Free Lunch
School A	590	11.5% White 75.7% Black 1.3% Asian 11.5% Hispanic	89%
School B	782	.1% White 99.9% Black	96%
School C	640	99.9% Black .1% Hispanic	100%

Non-urban Schools

School A	397	41.8% White 54.4% Black 3.8% Hispanic	41%
School B	456	80.4% White 18.6% Black .2% Asian .7% Hispanic	19%
School C	485	59.0% White 39.4% Black .2% Asian 1.4% Hispanic	39%

Project Overview

The university-based project initiators enlisted the commitment of the schools' staffs before beginning. At least 80 percent of each faculty voted to participate. The superintendents and their top managers lent their full backing, promising technical assistance from their curriculum divisions, and approving liberal amounts of professional leave for teachers and principals to use for planning and for attending local, regional, and national conferences. (The leave was paid for by project funds.)

During the project's first year, each school assessed its overall educational program using data-gathering tools that organized information and planning around adolescent developmental needs (Dorman, 1984). A principal from another city, who had successfully used the process in her own school, led the opening in-service workshop on how to conduct the program assessment. Each team then trained eight to twelve of its school's teachers, parents, and other community representatives to use the assessment. From January to March, the teams undertook two major activities: They interviewed every teacher, school staff member, and administrator, plus a representative sample of parents and students; and they observed each teacher's class.

After collecting data, teams met individually to examine and analyze the information they had gathered and to plan program options that better served the developmental needs of their students. The entire process -- data collection through action planning -- was completed in eight months, concluding by the end of the school year. Throughout the assessment, teams worked under the direction of one or two teacher leaders from their schools. Although the principals supported their teams' work and were informed about their progress, they served only as facilitators. None was directly involved in the data collection, analysis, or reporting, although they became more active later, when their teams began to write action plans.

During the second year, the teams undertook a similar examination focused specifically on their mathematics programs. A companion to the general assessment used in the first year (Pechman, 1989) had been designed in response to national mandates to improve mathematics teaching and learning (e.g., Mathematical Sciences Education Board, 1989; National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1989) and to strengthen its integration with other core subjects.[2] The data collection, analysis, and planning followed the pattern established in the first year. Interdisciplinary teams, including parents, conducted the mathematics assessment in the fall, analyzed the data, and designed mathematics program

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[2] The ***Mathematics Assessment Process for the Middle Grades*** (Pechman, 1989) was designed during this phase of the project. The Ford Foundation funded both its development and the staff support used by schools to conduct their mathematics assessment and planning. A revised version of the assessment and planning materials, ***MAP: Mathematics Assessment Process*** (Pechman, 1992), is now available from the Curriculum/Technology Resource Center at the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

improvement plans in the spring, concluding with action recommendations by the end of the school year. Other activities during the second year included the following: initial implementation of the recommendations of the six action plans developed during the first year; a fall conference to unify the teams and to highlight local issues in middle-grades programming; distributing a newsletter about the project and each school's first-year achievements; and monthly consortium meetings of the principals, occasionally including team leaders, to guide the teams' efforts beyond the action planning phase.

In the fall of the second year, at the suggestion of the project facilitators, the principals and teacher leaders strengthened their ties by formally identifying themselves as the Middle-Grades Consortium (MGC). Its purposes in the early stages were vague, with two primary emphases: (1) nurturing and extending the collaboration that had begun the previous year among the leadership and the faculties in the six schools, and (2) uniting members as advocates for improved middle schools within their school districts, recognizing that they were unable to accomplish individual school goals without broader support from their central offices and communities. As the school year drew to a close, the group adopted a third goal: to search for funding that would sustain their work beyond the life of the project's initial sponsorship.

The university facilitators ended their formal association with the project at the end of the second year, when the assessments and program planning concluded. The MGC received additional funding, however, and continued its activities for a third year.[3] During this time, the practitioner-directed consortium tried to solidify the improvement agenda within the original participating schools and expanded its membership by inviting teacher leaders and principals from the other area middle-grades schools to join. Through monthly meetings and a culminating symposium for the staffs and representative parents in the two districts' fourteen middle schools, the consortium formalized a network of colleagues and collaborators dedicated to continuing middle-grades improvement.

Research Questions and Methods

Two questions were the focus of research activities that paralleled the school change effort:

1. What factors affected the implementation of faculty-led, assessment-based school improvement efforts?

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[3] The BellSouth Foundation funded the Middle-Grades Consortium for a third and final year. With partial funding for the network that emerged during the project's first two years, local leaders and their school-based colleagues carried forward into a third year the collaboration and some of the teacher-directed staff development they had initiated.

2. What obstacles and opportunities affected the course of the hoped-for improvement envisioned for these middle-grades schools?

Data gathering took place from the beginning of the project in the summer of 1987 through the spring of 1990. The research team conducted an initial survey of the attitudes of all faculty members in the six schools in February 1988 and a follow-up survey in February 1989. In the project's third year, one member of the research team conducted two site visits. The first occurred in the fall of 1989, and involved interviewing the consortium's key organizers: two principals and three teacher leaders. During the second site visit, in March 1990, the researchers met with representative teacher leaders and principals to discuss the year's activities and to gather evaluative data about the project's outcomes. Throughout the project's three years, one- to two-hour interviews were conducted periodically with local leaders and key participants, including teachers and principals in each school, appropriate central-office contact persons, and several parents or business contributors.

The research team took extensive field notes during observations of staff-development activities, key meetings of consortium teachers and principals, and school-level team meetings attended by project staff. We assessed school climate and changes resulting from implementing the schools' assessment and action planning through additional in-school observations conducted in several schools during the fall of 1988 and the spring of 1989. Finally, the team examined and analyzed the schools' action plans, annual test scores, and program-related documents (handbooks, discipline codes, activities for teacher-advisor groups, programs, etc.).

Factors and Themes of Collaborative Change

As each team conducted its assessment and began to initiate changes, several factors emerged across all sites that influenced the schools' capacities to achieve their reform goals. We identified six factors that continued to affect the long-term enactment of change throughout the life of the project:

1. Stability of the school environment;
2. Central-office support;
3. Active and constructive involvement of teacher leaders;
4. Cohesiveness of the faculty;
5. Faculty commitment to the change process;

6. Ongoing involvement of a facilitating principal.

The first two of these factors, environmental stability and central-office support, appear in the school-improvement literature as fundamental to sustained improvement (David, 1991; Fullan, 1991; Louis and Miles, 1990; Sarason, 1971). Both are necessary, and they cannot be replaced by any other contributing strength. The other four factors -- teacher leadership, a cohesive faculty, faculty commitment to change, and a facilitating principal -- are interactive and more fluid. These factors have also been described by other researchers examining school change (Lieberman, 1986; McNeil, 1986; Stein and Wang, 1988). In this project, we observed how the vitality of any one factor can compensate for weaknesses in another. The interaction of these factors is depicted in Figure 2 (on page 11) and described in this section through case examples.

Stability of the School Environment

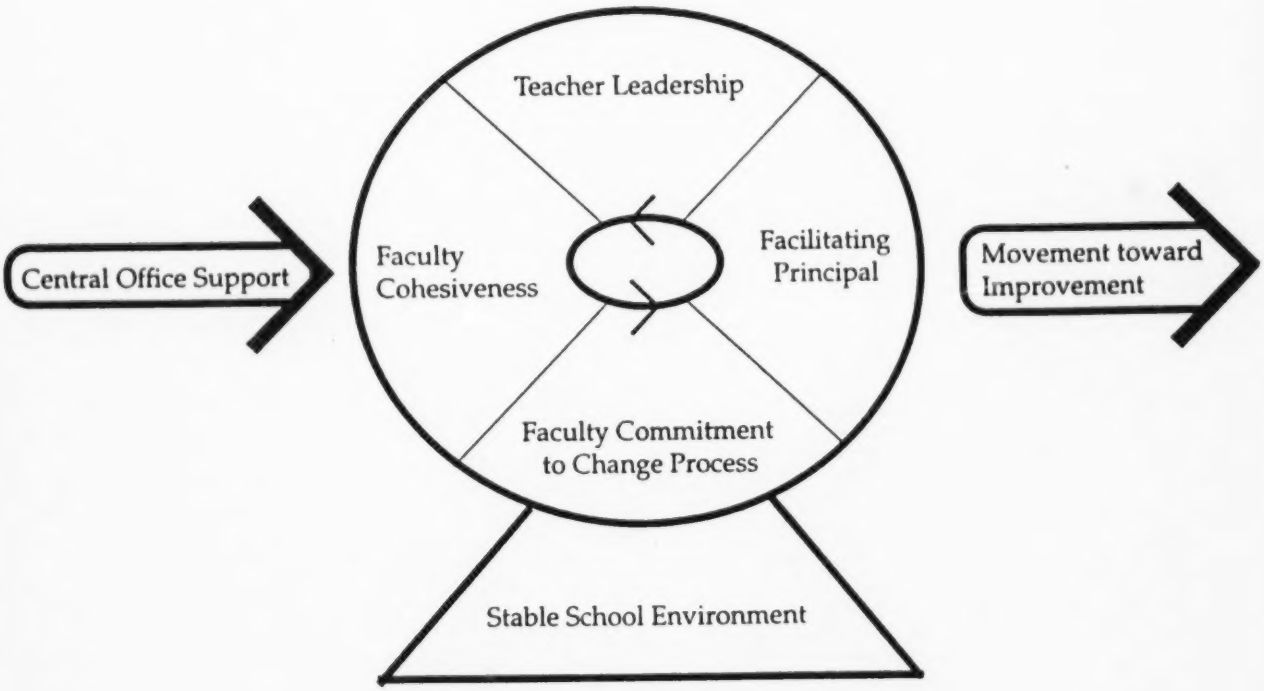
Researchers have established that a reform initiative cannot succeed without some basic environmental permanence (Fullan, 1991; Huberman and Crandall, 1982; Kyle, 1985; Louis and Miles, 1990). Administrative leadership fundamentally affects teachers' initial willingness to engage in the planning process and to follow the planning with action. Principals are vital players in creating this stability, but they do not do it alone. Respected teacher leaders contribute significantly (Barth, 1988; Lieberman, 1988a; Little, 1982). Characteristics of environmental steadiness include a reliable organizational structure, an atmosphere that accepts inquiry and self-examination, and a strong, active role for teachers. While the principal establishes the tone and the norms of productivity and collaboration, at least a core of teachers must be involved in the initial planning and must remain in the school to complete the process. Surprisingly, changing principals was not automatically destabilizing.

One of the MGC's six schools had a long-standing reputation as a troubled place. The school served a highly mobile student population from nearby housing projects known for drug trafficking and street violence. The year this project began, the acting principal was appointed by the central office with a mandate to "straighten things out." He began his tenure with energy and enthusiasm, and he saw in this project an opportunity to share the challenge of the work with teachers. Before long, however, he found his own status and support for carrying out the hoped-for changes undercut by unreliable central administrative responses. The year was as crisis-ridden as previous years had been and, predictably, theresulting instability affected all that followed. Although the faculty began the project with interest, their enthusiasm and commitment rapidly waned. Thus, while teachers continued to collaborate with MGC colleagues at workshops and meetings whenever possible, by the end of the first project year, their follow-through to accomplish goals was already weakened by the uncertainty that surrounded them.

Figure 2

Building Local Leadership for Middle-Grades School Improvement

Factors Affecting the Change Process



None of the other schools was as precarious as this, but each school's teachers noted that environmental stability enabled their success or that instability was a primary source of continuing frustration. At the project's start, only three of the principals had tenure in their buildings. Three others were relatively new and were closely monitored by district administrators during the life of the project. By the end of the project's three years, only three of the six original principals (two of the tenured and one of the new ones) were still in these schools. In addition, one of the two tenured principals had lost administrative favor, and a new superintendent transferred several key MGC teacher leaders out of his building.

In the end, only two of the six sites had the benefit of administrative stability during the life of this project. Although the changes did not halt the individual leaders' collaboration with the MGC, they undercut the schools' capacity to accomplish the project goals. As a result, plans set in years one and two varied greatly, as did the changing management relationships that developed around them, and so did the extent of program implementation.

Central-Office Support

The second factor, central-office support, is also well recognized by researchers as critical to successful reform (Cuban, 1984; David, 1989; 1991; Pajak and Glickman, 1989), but the limits of such support were particularly apparent during the life of this project. Central-office endorsement of improvement agendas gave the effort credibility, signaled that it was worthy and important, and increased the likelihood of cooperation between schools and district administrators. These top administrators have the potential to inspire autonomy, encourage intellectual freedom, and help teachers adjust their instructional programs to better serve students. Unfortunately, by the middle of this project, it was clear they would offer only tacit support and "benign" neglect, and this was not sufficient. In the end, both central-office inaction and the persistence of old mandates and arbitrary rules were insurmountable obstacles to progress.

In the large-city system, principals, who functioned autonomously at their sites, encountered bureaucratic hurdles from the start that placed on them a series of burdens their counterparts in the small school district did not face. "The system should have made more of a commitment," one city principal lamented. "Everyone [in the central administration] should have been familiar with the program. Instead *they* were calling me to fill them in on things they should have known about." Although the superintendent officially supported the project (showing up at the kick-off meeting, confirming his commitment through a letter of appreciation), his lieutenants remained unavailable and aloof, offering only symbolic gestures in place of direct, on-site assistance. The irony and frustration for the school-based staffs in the urban district were that the time and attention the central-office staff *did* give to the MGC and their schools were substantial when measured against what they normally gave.

For a while in the first year and in the early part of the second, the active involvement of the central administration in the nonurban system presented a contrasting case of central-office support; the dynamic director of the middle grades personally committed himself to the project's success. He regularly met with the principals to discuss the assessment process and to guide them in working out the inevitable tensions associated with improvement. Through the assistance of his office, the project also received support from the school board president, who, in this district, was a more powerful force than the superintendent. The implication for the change process at the school was clear: The administration and the community were committed to the project and wanted to see it succeed.

By the end of year two, however, the project saw an abrupt change for the small district. A new superintendent was appointed and he transferred the middle-schools director into a less important position. Once the central office stopped being a reliable resource for the middle schools, fragile new alliances and initiatives shattered, and, once again, relationships and programs had to be built from scratch.

Active and Constructive Involvement of Teacher Leaders

Active teacher leadership promoted cohesiveness and commitment among faculties. The most effective leaders were nonjudgmental, well organized, and proactive. They maintained communication as easily with colleagues as they did with their principals. Commitment took many forms, and teachers filled a number of functions in addition to that of team leader: They willingly shared project responsibilities; they promptly completed tasks they undertook; and they contributed their points of view candidly, but without rancor. Successful teacher leaders shifted easily as their roles were redefined by new situations, and, as easily, they relied on and learned from the contributions of others.

The active and constructive involvement of teacher leaders was especially evident in the ways the six schools selected their teams' leaders. Two examples make the case. In one school, team co-leaders -- one an experienced school counselor, the other a newer special education teacher -- worked together tirelessly to coordinate the project activities. The principal in their school turned the project completely over to them, transferring the many details of organizing and securing the team's cooperation. Their enthusiasm was contagious. They easily engaged colleagues' interest and they culminated the year with a usable action plan that had the full backing of the entire staff.

Another school enlisted the well-developed organizational and persuasive abilities of the longtime school librarian. She created faculty committees and involved every teacher in the project, avoiding the difficulty of creating a group of team "insiders." She also modeled the spirit of self-examination by acknowledging her own program's weaknesses, an admission that often lifted anxiety from potentially difficult meetings and enabled a more open confrontation with problems brought to light by the school's study.

The negative cases were also informative. In two schools, teacher leaders were relatively new, and their faculties, from a long history of disinterest, involved themselves only to the degree that they thought was required. Early resistance to the assessment led individuals to question the confidentiality of the process and the accuracy of the data. Eventually the teams gathered the required data, drafted half-hearted and controversial reports, and completed action plans, but only because the principal stepped in. Not surprisingly, in the process, the faculty (with the exception of its leaders) lost interest in continuing involvement with the project.

Faculty Cohesiveness

There was wide variation in the cohesiveness of the six faculties in this project. Some faculties were connected tightly when the project began; others were more divided. Three of the principals carefully selected team leaders and team members to build on cohesive instincts within their faculties. In other schools, the existing faculty ties were strong from years of group "survival" with students who, daily, struggled to cope with almost overwhelming obstacles. By contrast, the other faculties were splintered. In one of the schools, formed through the merger of two schools, old loyalties obstructed unity. In others, the faculty "old-timers" routinely questioned the need for changes that newer teachers wanted, or personal animosities disrupted collegial efforts. The causes of the tensions varied, but their restraining effect on the change process did not.

Faculty cohesiveness can work to either the benefit or the detriment of the change process. In two of the schools where the faculties were unified, teachers collaborated to keep the process open and functioning smoothly. Teacher leaders worked sensitively and persistently with their colleagues and brought them behind the process. Data collecting was shared among many people, and analysis was conducted openly. In both cases, the staffs examined the findings from their studies in small groups first and then as a unified team. Each went to its principal with carefully worded but constructive critiques of the current program, including elements of the principal's leadership. The principals received their reports in the constructive spirit in which they were offered. Action planning followed smoothly in these cases.

Cohesion worked negatively as well. In two other schools, the faculties "hung together" against their principals' hostility to their action plans, standing firmly behind their teams. When the principal criticized and tried to change the team's reports, the faculty coalesced around their leaders and against the principal. Eventually, compromise action plans were written, but teachers made no commitment to them and the overall process left a bitter feeling within the unified staffs that was slow to dissipate.

Faculty Commitment to the Change Process

Faculty unity is only part of the story. Sustained commitment to the change process itself was also needed. The faculties that "owned" their assessment results in some important way were committed to implementing changes they recommended.

After two years with this project, three of the schools had engaged a relatively broad contingent of the faculty who were committed to initiatives such as creating advisory periods, offering extended after-school activities for students, and examining options for more flexible, block scheduling of core subjects. Camaraderie was taking root, and teachers boasted about improvements in school communication. They highlighted the achievements of "students-of-the-month." Where drab walls or moralistic quotations once greeted visitors, student work was now prominently displayed. Interdisciplinary teaching and collaborative planning within teams increased. Finally, in a number of new ways, numerically small but enthusiastic parent groups participated more actively.

In the schools where the faculty's commitment wavered, there were serious implementation problems. One of these was the tough school described earlier. The principal's reaction to an action plan he deemed unsatisfactory was to reassert his control of the planning, leaving the faculty with little energy for continued collaboration. In the second school where faculty commitment to the project dissolved, the assessment team felt overburdened by the process, and they lost interest in following their action plans. In time, the principal initiated aspects of the team's proposal without consulting with teachers.

The third school affected by flagging commitment to change had been the closest to the middle-school concept at the start of the project. While the faculty had voted to participate, few thought that their commitment would mean making any real adjustments. In their minds, they were already doing a good job and they never bought into the effort with full enthusiasm. At the end of the project's second year, the principal interceded to get the change process on track but, as he did, the new superintendent threatened to transfer much of his staff and let it be known that he would not hesitate to move teachers at a moment's notice. Any residual faculty commitment dissipated quickly.

Ongoing Involvement of a Facilitating Principal

The principals in this study worked within strongly authoritarian school districts. Their superintendents and their supervisors subscribed to the view that an effective principal is, most importantly, in control. Assertive control was expected. The principal who was challenged by new ideas and entertained competing values in the school was less admired. Within these schools and in their communities, there was little tolerance for real diversity. A strong principal adhered to the established norms, constantly checking to assure that boundaries and rules were clearly established and well maintained.

The prevailing community expectations contrasted sharply with the project's reform ideal of principal as a leading collaborator and the organizer and protector of a "community of leaders" (Barth, 1988, 1990; Lieberman, 1988a, 1988b). Through several decades of reform, principal leadership has come to mean encouraging collegial practices within an open system, one in which there is room for philosophical variation and debate (Cuban, 1988; Sarason, 1971). Planning and obligations are shared, as are risk taking and credit for what is accomplished (Little, 1986). While vision, philosophical consistency, and program continuity are important elements of a clear, consistent structure for students, diversity should also be nurtured (McPherson, 1982).

For collaborative reform to succeed, both principals and teachers must rethink traditional roles as they construct processes for genuinely sharing power. Such a leadership style, however, must be acceptable to district leaders and to the community, as well as teachers, or there is little incentive for principals to alter their ways of doing business. A major stumbling block to the ultimate success of this project was that principals paid little more than lip-service to the ideal of relinquishing decision-making authority to teachers. The principals had worked hard to achieve their positions within their respective schools and systems; they well understood and met the expectations of their leadership. Although they spoke to the project facilitators of their commitment to collegiality and collaboration, they knew where the "buck" really stopped: "Right here, at my doorstep!" one principal routinely reminded the researchers. Parents, teachers, and other administrators wanted to know that these principals were "in charge." Recognizing that their schools needed more than the traditional offerings, however, the principals struggled to adopt more responsive leadership approaches, even while holding onto ultimate control. They knew that they had to keep a tight grip on the reins in their schools, even as they expressed their commitment to sharing leadership and increasing staff autonomy.

In the sites where the project ran most smoothly, principals acted as facilitators and staff developers, balancing administrative control and instructional leadership. Although no principal was entirely a "facilitating manager" (David and Peterson, 1984), teams were most successful when the principals relinquished strict authority and replaced it with staff development. In such cases, they actively assisted the project activities without directing committees and planning. They observed constructively in classrooms, connected teachers with resources, and publicized teachers' accomplishments. Following Little's (1986) model of collegial intervention, their facilitating took a variety of forms.

The authoritarian organizational structure in three of the schools worked against innovation. The teachers and their principals had been born and raised in the community. They did not challenge the *status quo* of administrative authority, even when they were dissatisfied. This often meant accepting what should have been changed and modernized long ago. Often this was because they did not have alternative models to draw on. Neither principals nor teachers had seen in action many of the innovations suggested in the middle-grades literature. Exploratory classes, advisory programs, and cooperative learning were

foreign concepts. It was easier to do what had always been done than to grope uncertainly to create their own versions.

Personal knowledge of alternative teaching and programming practices did exist among a few talented and inquiring members of the principals on the consortium team. But the long-held norms of modesty and silence regarding what happened behind the "closed doors" of the classroom and in the sanctity of a principal's domain meant that sharing new discoveries or successful initiatives among colleagues occurred only gradually and under the tutelage of the most sensitive and patient leaders.

Summary of Change Factors

These six factors affected the collaborative reform, and each factor was weighted differently in each site. The stability of the school and the sense that it is a safe environment for inquiry proved to be essential prerequisites for initiating and sustaining any interest in change. Especially in the urban setting, where principals acted with little central-office direction, teachers required a strong element of personal and professional safety to believe they were really free to initiate a productive assessment and planning process. Even in the nearby small town, the effort splintered and collapsed when a loyal board advocate stepped down as president and a new superintendent undercut the trust that had begun to emerge in the schools.

Central-office support is the second factor that potentially promotes collaboration, but at least two of the urban schools demonstrated that collaboration toward change can occur even in its absence. Principals with the confidence that their independent functioning would not be undercut by the downtown office moved decisively. They could have been even more effective in initiating new programs quickly with central-office involvement. The principals overcame the lack of institutional assistance, however, by turning for help to their teachers, to colleagues within their consortium, or to the university-based project directors.

Teacher leadership, cohesiveness, and commitment to change, and the presence of a facilitating principal were factors that contributed variously to the change process within each school. Where cohesiveness was missing, a teacher leader was sometimes able to generate enough commitment from a small group to carry out a task. Where the commitment to an idea was lacking, a cohesive faculty might support a teacher leader simply because it was asked. Where the principal was a facilitator, the staff and the school were more deeply committed to questioning old ways and seeking alternatives.

Obstacles and Opportunities in Collaborative, Site-Directed School Change

In an essay synthesizing the complex literature on school change, Anderson and Cox (1988) suggested that strategies for creating and sustaining educational improvement in schools must be based on four core elements:

1. Collaboration and inclusion.

2. A shared new vision of what education is about, one in which adults model what they expect the young to develop.

3. Intra- and multiorganizational frameworks, created by stakeholders, that will support and sustain the rebuilding that is begun.

4. A nonlinear approach, one that works on several fronts simultaneously, going beyond mandates toward an evolving vision.

Each of these elements was incorporated into the model of change used here, but experience taught how difficult it is to establish them in practice. As it turned out, there were more obstacles to change than opportunities to foster it.

Deus ex Machina

A common belief among many of this project's participants was that both problems and solutions lay outside their control. Problems were caused by lack of money, unreasonable state regulations, minimum parental involvement, and irrational state and local politics, not by their teachers' or principals' limited expertise. Solutions, it was thought, began with more money, changes in state regulations, or greater parental involvement, not necessarily with faculty initiative or change.

The collaborative assessment and action planning model we used modified this perception very little. Those whose attitudes shifted or who tried to adopt new practices were team members or teachers who were closely connected to the consortium leaders or to its university facilitators. Even these optimistic, within-school change agents -- "the idea champions" (Bank and Williams, 1981) -- were able to influence only a few others within their faculties. Due to the many organizational uncertainties that continued, skepticism and wariness of the possibilities for change predominated as the project concluded.

These authoritarian systems were rife with the "contradictions of control" (McNeil, 1986). The obstacles to what staff can do without permission and active "top-down" support

were very real. Decision makers resided outside of the school building. They ranged from influential community members through various levels of system-based supervisory personnel who regulated the resources and rules that facilitated or hindered change. Thus, while the observed "waiting-to-be-rescued" reactions were unfortunate, they were not unreasonable responses in situations where regulations were inconsistently and sometimes punitively enforced. Neither principals nor teachers knew when their judgment would be undercut or, worse, their well-intended actions would be punished. Many practitioners felt it was sensible simply to remain uninvolved, never challenging the system at all.

Although participation in this project was sanctioned in the superintendent's office, there were other levels of power that worried teachers and principals. Do the subject-matter supervisors support the project? What about the area superintendents or the state department of education? Will we move down the road to change, and, midway, be ordered to reverse course? From the start, it was clear to site staffs that sudden administrative changes might occur, quickly changing the rules once again. As it turned out, indeed, soon into the project this began to happen, leaving teachers understandably leery of how much decision-making authority they could ever really expect to have.

A Sense of Efficacy

Improvement occurs in schools when relationships with students, parental involvement, instructional methods, discipline, and other means of personalizing learning coalesce. But seasoned professionals will not alter their accustomed patterns without seeing ahead how they or their students will directly benefit (Corcoran, Walker, and White, 1988). Teachers who have for several decades watched successive short-term change efforts come and go are rightly skeptical of consultants bearing promises of improvement.

At the heart of educators' commitment to a new order is their sense of efficacy, their authority to initiate and carry out their recommendations (Stein and Wang, 1988). Some theorists divide self-efficacy into two parts: an individual's confidence in his or her ability to adopt the particular behavior and his or her confidence that practicing the behavior will lead to the desired result (Bandura, 1982). Based on prior experience, teachers in this study knew both principles applied negatively. Their own limited knowledge about alternative practices gave them reason to question whether they could teach differently. If they did change the ways they worked, how could they be certain these changes would benefit the education they offered their students? The institutionalization of ideas promoted by this project relied on strengthening teachers' sense of efficacy as change agents in their schools, a goal that turned out to be unattainable given the short time and the chaotic uncertainty in which these teachers lived.

A Place for Symbols of Change in the Making

Consortium leaders and the project facilitators tried to overcome doubts about the project's potential by emphasizing the symbolic value of small successes. We chose several ways to achieve this. When teachers worked together, administrators and project facilitators vocally applauded their teams' work; team members were invited to meetings and receptions with high-level administrators and powerful community members to discuss their achievements; planning was conducted in the comfortable conference rooms of area businesses; an attractive information brochure that incorporated information about the achievements of each school was widely distributed within the community; and, in one of the districts, team leaders appeared at a televised school board meeting and were profiled in the local newspaper.

Symbolic efforts sustained expectations of the project's possible success during the difficult first year. In each school, a core of the faculty's initial enthusiasts stayed with the team effort through the next year. Furthermore, every school saw at least incremental adjustments in many teachers' attitudes and practices, or, in cases where the principals remained strong, some limited program reorganization.

At the project's end, some teachers spent a little more of their workday getting to know their students, appreciating -- even celebrating -- their diversity and affirming their growth. By scheduling advisory groups, teachers found time to "just talk with kids." For some, this was an especially rewarding experience, one that they had almost forgotten they could have in the recent years' overemphasis on accountability and academic achievement. The unmet challenge for the teams and their colleagues was to go beyond the symbolic beginnings to establish new student-centered activities and to begin using more responsive teaching approaches while continuing to push for more fundamental program reform.

We do not know whether attitude or behavior change must come first in an overall change effort, but, either way, there are strong indications that symbolic change can be an important and solid first step (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). One dilemma of the project is that because of the concentration on planning, its first major outcome was a paper document, a plan to act, and not action itself. The leaders of the assessment process recognized that much work remained before changes would be evident. A representative symbol of something coming, in place of major action, was all that was available to keep the vision in focus, and it was not enough to root the seeds of reform.

"It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better"

It is a commonplace that change is never easy, but it is necessary. Weisbrod (1989) describes individuals as residing in a "four-room apartment . . . representing cyclical phases of living from contentment, through denial, to confusion, to renewal, and back again to

contentment" (1989, p. 266). He argues that change represents a " 'little death,' a letting go of the past to actualize a desired future. We change rooms as we grow."

Inevitably, as participants moved among the available "rooms," they experienced tensions in relationships with their colleagues. The process entailed risk and pain. In some instances, it damaged relationships, since team leaders and even principals were inexperienced facilitators of group process, and good ways to reduce the tensions were unclear to them. In each school, the self-examination led to criticism and severe internal tensions. Principals often felt attacked; team leaders were caught between the faculty and the principal or between factions within the faculty. These feelings were unsettling, and the long-term benefits of this discomfort were rarely evident. Ironically, self-examination seemed most difficult for the schools that, at the start of the project, appeared to be most cohesive. Perhaps they had the most to lose from change. They prided themselves on their progress in becoming middle schools, so when new data revealed weaknesses, this had a destabilizing, demoralizing effect.

Three years after the start of the project, equilibrium was restored in all the schools, and new pressures for change, new programs, and new administrators' mandates absorbed teachers' energies. What remained of the collaboration and assessment experience was what individuals did together. Active consortium members spoke proudly of their school's dedication to becoming more responsive to students, but old ways were still entrenched, and pressures to find the time and resources to accomplish the goals they had set remained as relentless as they had been when the project began.

The Value of Sharing Ideas

Surveys of the schools' faculties indicated that being able to work and talk with colleagues within and across schools was the most valuable achievement of the project for teachers and principals alike. This sharing seemed especially significant for the principals and teacher leaders who continued to meet in regular monthly consortium meetings until the project formally concluded. Teacher leaders and principals saw for the first time that schools shared similar problems, and they learned a great deal from discussing their successful and unsuccessful attempts to tackle them. They gained much-needed perspective. In some cases, teachers realized they "didn't have it so bad after all," while, in other cases, observing neighboring schools and talking with peers caused teachers to question their own complacency.

The Need for New Skills to Lead Change

During the first two years of the project, the team leaders and principals received several days of staff development that they, in turn, provided to their colleagues. Without

doubt, more extensive technical assistance was needed for teams and their principals. This reform effort put teachers in unfamiliar roles: evaluators, gathering and analyzing evaluation data; change agents, implementing action plans they had developed; leaders, mobilizing and organizing peers to carry out a variety of unfamiliar tasks; and others. Team leaders worked hard, often to the limits of their experience and abilities. More open relationships might have been possible within the teams, between the team and the principal, and with the larger faculty, if leaders had been better equipped to anticipate problems, understand the dynamics of change, and find more effective ways to confront likely problems.

Just as additional leadership skills would have facilitated the process, greater access to knowledge relevant to middle-grades students and program options would have generated more innovative action plans. Project staffs had limited knowledge about how their schools could better meet the needs of early adolescents. They were unaware of models, programs, and ideas that have led to substantive change in other successful middle schools. But, even with suggestions for readings, films, speakers, and in-house discussions of alternatives, it was difficult for teachers to envision how new programs would work in their own settings. Furthermore, putting innovations into practice within what teachers regarded to be the limits of districtwide or state regulations presented formidable obstacles. As a result, the action plans tried to patch up weak systems, but they avoided creating new structures and designs.

This situation challenged the project staff. What is the proper role of external facilitators in a program presented as different from others because it empowers teachers? If teachers are truly free to study their schools and devise their own solutions, rather than adopting outsiders' answers, how active should consultants be? How could project directors have increased teachers' visions and the range of solutions from which they could choose, while still assuring that the school-site teams retained full ownership of the process?

Facilitators responded in a myriad of ways, but with uneven success. We arranged interschool visitations, circulated research reports, and offered information on interdisciplinary teaming, teacher-advisor groups, and other successful middle-school concepts. There were also free books and resources for parent involvement, and we sponsored successful in-service workshops on responsive programming for young adolescents. Moreover, principals used project funds to partially defray the costs of sending team members to conferences and workshops to learn for themselves how middle-school educators have redesigned traditional programs.

The schools responded appreciatively to these offers of assistance but, in general, used few of the ideas. Instead, they investigated options on their own, in their own ways. Several faculty members returned to graduate school. There were larger-than-ever turnouts of these faculties at the annual statewide middle-school conferences, and representatives attended Saturday-morning sessions devoted to issues of middle-school change. These efforts can be viewed only as *tentative* commitments to the *possibility* of a new tomorrow because further substantive evidence of change was missing.

Another troublesome challenge in guiding program development is how to meet teachers' requests, when they come, for additional training and planning opportunities. If release time is available, teachers have the chore of preparing for substitutes. They also feel responsible for educational losses that might occur in their absence when students are left for extended periods without the continuity provided by a regular instructor. This is most problematic when the best teachers are selected for leadership roles and are frequently called away from their teaching responsibilities. While team leaders seemed to enjoy and to grow in their expanded roles during this project, they were frustrated about the time it took away from their students. The option of offering training outside of the regular school day was not a satisfactory one, because it would have cut into teachers' preparation or personal time, both of which are essential to quality teaching. After-hours training is rightly perceived as a burden. This serious dilemma must be addressed creatively by educational policy makers and leaders as teachers adopt more active leadership roles, whether as part of a collegial decision-making process, differentiated staffing arrangements, or enhanced professional development efforts.

Responding to Students' Developmental Needs

The assessments used in this project and the resulting planning centered on young adolescents. The objective was to increase schools' academic and developmental effectiveness for students. For most teachers, these were goals easy to adopt but difficult to implement.

Action plans indicated the significance of the challenge. In spite of teachers' expressed commitments to students, their plans for action spoke as much to meeting adult needs as to supporting young adolescents. Teachers' plans called for improved discipline, greater parental involvement, and more resources. They also called for improved faculty morale and unity. Changing the substance and pattern of schooling for students was usually a lower priority. Why did this student-centered assessment process lead to such a strong emphasis on improving the structure of the school for adults?

Teachers were without reliable guideposts for making changes. Alternative program models were scarce. Greater substantive knowledge, variety and breadth of new experiences, or access to retraining might have led to more of a focus on students. On the other hand, the student-centered philosophy that undergirded the reform ideal was not fully shared by the traditional community in which these schools were embedded. Teachers, like other workers in complex bureaucratic organizations, need to know from experience how it feels to have their needs for continuity, creativity, and professional assistance met before they can expect to model that behavior with students (Lieberman, 1988a).

To provide students -- the primary clients -- with long-lasting educational support, it is necessary to be responsive to the legitimate needs of the professionals on whom we rely to initiate and sustain institutional changes we seek. This echoes themes of both Maslow's

(1962) hierarchy of needs, the Concerns Based Adoption Model's Stages of Concern (Hall and Hord, 1987), and the findings about developing leadership patterns in other teacher-directed change efforts (Lieberman, 1986; 1988a; see also Berman and McLaughlin, 1978). Clearly, teachers should be able to expect the same quality of attention from their supervisors and facilitators as they are expected to provide to their students.

Conclusions

Our research focused on two questions. The response to the question "What effects the implementation of faculty-led improvement efforts?" identified six factors: the stability of the school environment; central-office leadership that encourages an active collegial process; on-site teacher leadership; faculty cohesiveness; faculty commitment to the change process; and the appropriate, ongoing involvement of a facilitating principal who establishes and encourages what Little (1982) called "the norms of collegiality."

A complex picture emerged in response to the second question, "What obstacles and opportunities affected the course of the improvement effort in these middle-grades schools?" The opportunities for changing schools are many and varied: altering teachers' attitudes toward the ten- to fifteen-year-old age group; adjusting instructional techniques to assure their responsiveness to early adolescence; designing new curricula to be consistent with the interests and changes that young adolescents are experiencing; providing flexible instructional teams and advisor/advisee groups; changing bus schedules to make after-school programs possible; altering school board or state policies; and myriad other options, some tried successfully and others not explored.

Work in this middle-school change project tried to strengthen school leaders' control over the change process. Participating principals and teachers commented with gratifying enthusiasm about the personal benefits of working collaboratively with colleagues across schools and across roles -- teachers, administrators, and university personnel united in a single effort. In monthly team meetings, principals and teachers both found mutual support and continuing professional growth and development. Participants all felt their colleagues were striving to improve what they did, and some succeeded in working together more often.

But leading change through increased collegiality and control, under the direction of local leaders, is not without its difficulties. It is painfully slow, full of reversals, and liable to fail. These problems are especially disappointing where evidence of change is most needed. The measure of a school's success is highly individualized, meaning different things to different people. It fluctuates as time passes and new events alter people's interpretations of what has happened. Traditionally, teachers have not been expected to be school program

planners, so many find their skills are undeveloped, and the benefits of self-assessment and evaluation are not always immediately evident.

For any meaningful involvement by teachers and even hesitant action toward change, there must be an ongoing sense of accomplishment and an earnest nurturing of the participants' work as the process goes forward. The effort must be taken seriously and supported at all levels of the district's administrative structure. Teachers need an open and accepting environment where they can assist one another, learn together, and discover their potential for innovation. New ways to provide time for professional collaboration, planning, and re-education, along with environmental stability, are essential.

The interacting elements of change can be obstacles to innovation and school improvement, but they also present opportunities. The experiences of these six schools suggest that self-directed collegial planning is a potentially powerful mechanism for initiating and promoting practitioner-led change. For initiatives to take hold, however, far more than commitment and collegiality are needed.

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